Writing: Reflection and Research May Increase Teacher Understanding

By Alipio Barra

Most EFL courses, especially those aiming at the average teenage student attending a state school, establish what the learner will be able to do by the end of a learning cycle as far as the writing skills are concerned. Needless to say, the expected performance has varied in form, content, and purpose, according to the approach. "Students in English-language classrooms no longer do the same kind of writing activities that they did 25 years ago" (Raimes 1987). The rapid methodological changes have brought about some confusion, as teachers have not had time to fully internalize them. But what, to my mind, has unsettled teachers, the education system, parents, and employers the most is the poor quality of the students' achievement when compared with the objectives.

Feel free to brainstorm "the writing problem." You will end up with a variety of worries: spelling mistakes, poor punctuation, repetition of lexical and structural items, interference of the mother tongue, lack of stylistic features, little knowledge about the topic, unimaginative content, poor paragraph organization, incoherence, slack cohesiveness, unawareness of basic rhetorical categories, difficulty in separating facts from opinion, difficulty in expressing meaning, etc.

Deepening Reflection

1. How have teachers reacted to the problem? I think we can outline three types of attitudes and strategies:

Negative Reactions: ignoring, grumbling, punishing students, keeping to old routines, shouldering all the blame, giving up.

The teacher uses her authority to tell the students they must comply with models and rules. A weaker personality may lead to self-flogging methods. The abdicated type tells herself to give up thinking about the issue and elects the (lazy!) student as the culprit.

Positive Reactions: giving vent to worries by talking to colleagues, seeking information by going to seminars or reading, borrowing from others.

We do not know whether the teacher is eager to change routines, but she has definitely found out that a fruitful course is to meet other people. This gesture is both confronting and cathartic.

Interactive Reactions: reflecting on experience, carrying out simple classroom research, interacting with the problem.

The teacher, most probably after some sort of positive reaction, decides to question her strategies and techniques. "I need to understand why my students make these mistakes" or "What will happen if I change this variable? Let me try!" or "If I do it this way, X will happen." Unfortunately, this interactive approach is often seriously hampered by institutional, professional, and psychological constraints.

2. What has been suggested? Our worries percolated into the T(E)FL profession, triggering off reactions from teachers, researchers, linguists, EFL methodologists, psychologists, and materials writers. For example, the English Teaching Forum alone has published about a hundred articles related to writing in the past 10 years.

Integrating writing with the other skills, the process of writing, more group work, more collaborative work among peers, project work, exploring reading (to make the learner aware of the writer's skills), exposure to good writing-these are some of the approaches that have brought about positive change. In "Why Write? From Purpose to Pedagogy" (English Teaching Forum, October 1987) Ann Raimes reflects on changes in the last 30 years, starting with two questions: Why do we ask our students to write? and Why do students of a second language need to write in that language?

3. Why hasn't the key to the writing problem been found yet? Dissatisfaction has not faded away. It seems to me that (a) the focus has been laid on training the teachers by adding to their "technology"; (b) by and large, teachers need strategies to raise their awareness of what may cause success or failure in their pupils' writing; they need self-esteem and confidence.

Teachers expect researchers to find solutions and give precise instructions for using the new findings. But, as David Nunan (1989) has remarked, the former do not seem to trust the latter and academics criticise teachers "for the superficiality of classroom applications of research findings." The gap is real. The large number of variables in the teaching-learning process makes it so difficult to replicate research that conclusions cannot be easily validated. "In spite of such infinite diversity [of variables] there exists the universal fact that human beings of all ages, attitudes, levels of intelligence, socioeconomic background, etc., succeed in acquiring L2s in a wide variety of both naturalistic and formal settings" (Seliger 1984). The ability to write is part of that acquisition, isn't it?

4. Is there a way to solve the writing problem? Research has proved that there is not a tailor-made panacea to be found. However, we cannot sit back, relax, and wait for top-bottom moves. It is high time classroom teachers launched initiatives that may raise their awareness of the problem. They are the ones who plan the lessons, carry out activities, face problems, and look for solutions.

But teachers need tools for development, which can start either by learning theories (language acquisition, for example) or by reflecting on one's own practice. Mary Finocchiaro (1988) wrote that "teachers should grow throughout their lifetime in (1) the awareness of their own strengths and perhaps weaknesses; (2) more positive attitudes toward themselves, their students, their colleagues, . . . ; (3) their deeper knowledge of the social and personality factors of their students that can influence learning . . .; (4) the enhancement of skills. . . ." She did not comment on the

order of the four parameters, but I think they highlight knowledge of self and students over knowledge of the subject matter; they also imply that, in order to develop, the teacher cannot rely on training alone. At best, training can facilitate.

Reflection and research to raise understanding

Next I will try and design what I think is a feasible scheme to carry out simple classroom research projects whose aim is to understand the students' feelings and problems in the area of writing. It draws a lot on a reflective approach the purpose of which is to fully exploit something teachers generate naturally every day in their professional lives: experience. How can teachers take advantage of what they have for free? Here are some steps to start with.

1. DEFINE THE WRITING PROBLEM THAT CONCERNS YOU

a. Is it something you would like to understand better? Do you want to find a solution? Or do you have a more ambitious objective in mind-for example, an experiment?

b. Check the genuineness of the problem by submitting it to all the kinds of criticism that you can think of. Jot down all the answers you get.

c. Meet your colleagues and tell them about the problem. Their comments may help you clarify it or add relevance to it.

2. SCRUTINIZE YOUR EXPERIENCE

a. Start somewhere; you do not need to scan all the years you have been teaching.

b. Are there any theories that have influenced the way you have dealt with the writing skill? Are there any EFL writers who have influenced you?

c. What are your favourite classroom writing activities? Are you still carrying them out the way you first used them? If they have changed can you describe why and how? How would you describe your students' feelings towards the writing tasks you give them?

d. Have you found in your practice any strong beliefs about writing-something you might call your dogmas?

e. How much do you owe to knowledge you acquired when you were doing your initial training or in-service training? And to what extent has your experience triggered off new developments? Has any part of this experience become new knowledge? Would you like to share it?

3. LOOK FOR PATTERNS AND LINKS

Your reflection brought forward a handful of answers scribbled on a piece of paper or stored in the back of your mind. Now look for patterns and connections. There might be something-a concept, a procedure, a warning-you are now happy to uncover! Something you did not have the

faintest idea of, maybe. That's where your own research project is likely to commence. But most probably you will end up with statements that sound so middle-of-the-road that they will fail to stir you up. Well, do keep your cool!

Let's look at a few examples of patterns anyone may end up with. (In square brackets I will enclose suggestions and guidance I might give each of the teachers to help them reflect on their experience to deepen their insights.)

Teacher 1. I tend to integrate writing with other skills in as natural a way as possible, an approach I learned from Donn Byrne. Writing not only appears naturally to support other skills like reading and listening, for example, but it also continues what is being done. The pupils seem to accept writing when it appears naturalisticalIy. [Recall your practice, find activities with and without integrated skills; study the differences. How do your students show they like that sort of writing activity?]

Teacher 2. Now I realise I have been a bit more concerned about accuracy. I tend to give mistakes and errors a lot of attention. That's why the one exercise they do almost every day is of the combining-sentences type, which gives me the chance to correct even the slightest mistake. I know it is a bit unnatural, but I was very keen on this exercise when I was a student myself. [Do your pupils enjoy it as much as you did? Study the sentences you give them to combine. Can you make your favourite format communicative?]

Teacher 3. In the past I used to give my students very abstract topics and little help. The result was below my expectations. Now I prefer topics that are more down-to-earth, and I always provide them with simple schemes, plans, or outlines. I am sure that the more they get, the better they will write. [You established two causal relationships between tasks and results. Exemplify both. See whether there are any other possible explanations.]

4. PLAN YOUR ACTION, NOW!

a. Let's take it for granted that the reflection period was both substantive (it provided insights of practical importance) and stimulating (it aroused your interest; you cannot stop now!).

b. In planning what you will do, you will have to be ready to exploit two roles: (1) participant-observer when you are fully involved in the activities; observation will be more difficult and data will be more subjective; (2) non-participant observer: those stages of the lesson when you just see if everyone is complying. Observation is easier; you may even take notes. Unfortunately, you will be less involved.

In spite of their drawbacks, "both participant and non-participant observation have many positive qualities to recommend them as research methodologies" (Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991).

c. Try and define a course of action. You want to understand your pupils' writing problems. Maybe you hope you will be able to bring about change in their attitudes towards writing. Although you are unlikely to start with hypotheses to be tested, that is not out of the question. If you want to confirm or disconfirm something, do not be too vague or ambitious.

You may even try a more experimental approach if you use a control group -where you keep to the ways the students are familiar with-and an experimental group treated differently. For example:

Same class, Day 1-plan the activity without changing the usual procedure. Gather information. Day 2-(the next day or week) plan a very similar activity changing a variable. Collect data; compare.

Same day, class divided in control group and experimental group-plan the lesson with two different procedures, one for each group; collect information; compare.

Different classes: control group (class 1)-carry out the usual procedure; collect data. Experimental group (class 2)-modify procedure; collect data; compare.

You must always be aware of the way other variables may interfere with the results.

d. Your research is expected to suit your students and your teaching style. Beware of its effects on your state of mind. Everything new is risky and causes anxiety. So plan carefully, to be able to include this new aspect in your daily schedule.

e. Ways of stating the object of research. Examples:

1. My students will write more. This is rather vague. What do you mean? More texts? More often? Longer texts? More types of text? Or several of the above combined?

2. My students will be given more information and preparation before they start writing a new text. This is a more objective purpose, but it may need a stronger effort to make it even more specific. What's that you call information? And preparation? Does it imply a causal relationship between preparation and better writing?

3. If the students get more preparation (information and simple outlines), they will certainly write better texts. Now you have put forward a hypothesis to be proved: if you prepare your students carefully, the outcomes will be better.

We are not saying that proposition 3 is more correct than 1 or 2, but it has more advantages. By making it more specific you can see if it is feasible and to what extent you will have to change your previous routine.

5. DO

a. Do things as you had planned: Decide on the duration of the experiment.

b. Observe, gather information. Right now you do not know what may be more relevant. Take notes (or audio/video record). Observation schedules can make data easier to record and retrieve.

c. To gather information use all the techniques you know of and find reasonable, which will depend on, for example, the activity, the object of research, your role, the lapse between the observation and the note-taking.

6. DATA ANALYSIS

a. Study all the information. What have you found out? Can you draw any conclusions? Do you still have the conjectures you had at the outset? Compare with all the notes and answers when you started your reflection (1 to 3 above).

b. Do you have to resume experimentation or do you think you can stop here? Do you understand your students better? Have you confirmed any initial hypotheses, if you had any? Can you establish any connection between two factors? What do you know that you did not know?

7. FURTHER STEPS

a. Towards you. The research-oriented work has some effects on the teacher's development regardless of the results. If you understand your students' writing difficulties better, if your knowledge has increased or if they are getting on better, your confidence and self-esteem will rise. If, on the contrary, your findings were inconclusive or, even worse, if the foreseen changes did not meet your expectations, you will realise how important it was, anyway. You learned about yourself and your students; you also acquired skills. Perhaps new paths will open for you. If your motivation and awareness increase, your students will be the ultimate beneficiaries, given the shift in perspective their teacher has undergone.

b. Towards others. Teacher development means sharing with others. So first, report to your colleagues at school. Show them what pushed you from the beginning and throughout the whole research period. Your audience will probably want to respond. So listen to them. This interaction may fulfill an important role; by highlighting the worth of teacher-initiated research based on one's own classroom action and experience, practitioners realize (a) they have the power to contribute to a greater knowledge of the issue under analysis; (b) everyone can start their own research; and (c) the gap between theory and practice can be shortened.

If you have enough time and confidence, the best way to try and spread the news is to write a brief account of research and send it to a specialty journal.

Conclusion

Foreign-language teachers often give in to the idea that making their teenage students better writers is an almost insurmountable problem. To cope with it, teachers have sought solutions everywhere. Unfortunately, the problem has not been eradicated. However, new insights can be propelled by teacher development. So it appears! By reflecting on experience and by carrying out simple classroom research, the teacher treads a long but rewarding path. More and more understanding of her students' feelings and experience when writing add up to the teacher's tools to deal with the problem. This empathic power, when fully integrated with all the other forms of

knowledge the teacher can utilize, may yield more satisfying results for both teachers and students. The problem is that, once again, the horizon that seemed just over the next slope is a bit farther, more out of reach.

APPLYING THE STEPS: AN EXAMPLE OF REFLECTION

The table opposite summarizes an example from my own practice of how reflection and simple classroom research projects are (or can be) used to promote a better understanding of students' [writing] problems and/or better cognitive processes and/or better outcomes.

I would like to make it clear that only after reading van Lier (1988) and Nunan (1989) did I become aware, by introspection, of a complex process that had developed. When I tried to blend and apply their material and research orientations, part of my previous classroom experience disclosed that somehow those reflection and research schemes had often been exploited in an empirical and subconscious way.

The brainstorming technique jutted out as one of the most interesting and successful in dealing with one of the students' difficulties. For that reason, I have often referred to it to demonstrate that any teacher might have undergone that sort of experience, led by intuition, perception, instinct-who knows? Then, all they need is some external hint to understand what they had done to be able, in all likelihood, to embark on "real" projects and gain new insights into their own classrooms, furthering, in so doing, more professional development.

1. DEFINING THE WRITING PROBLEM. In the mid-eighties I had the opportunity to teach high-school students attending the last year and aiming at higher education. For seven years (about 500 hours) they had learned English as their first foreign language. After meeting them I gradually realized they were not fond of writing activities. I had the impression they were not able to fully use their general knowledge of English, which they demonstrated in the oral activities. After a few weeks, this became one of my areas of concern for two reasons: (1) the syllabus required very specific outcomes in the writing skill; (2) a powerful external pressure: they would have to sit for a national (written) examination by the end of the school year. I simply had to do something!

2. SCRUTINIZING EXPERIENCE. I recalled and reviewed (as far as I could) all the first-term lessons up to that moment in order to make lists of any classroom activities that involved writing: human interest stories, descriptions of countries (economic and social issues), paragraphs about the violation of human rights, homework (student-generated texts to be read in class: letters, biographical notes), lesson summaries, sentences (transformation exercises), answers to questions, gap-filling exercises, note-taking.

I tried to note down everything I could recall.

3. LOOKING FOR PATTERNS AND LINKS. The students had problems in generating information, organising it cohesively and coherently, in using rhetorical categories like comparison and contrast, cause and effect, exemplification. Their oral performance helped hide those problems. Maybe my observation and analysis had been misled by a lack of awareness and

skills to use reflection. I related their difficulties to what I knew about the prevailing approaches to writing used by the schoolteachers. That was when I decided to browse through previous English Teaching Forum issues (before 1985), hoping to find help. I came across, among other things, an article by Hugh Leong: "Buzz-Group Activities" (April 1984), which had not caught my eye when I had first read it a few months before. It gave me some encouragement to experiment with brainstorming activities.

4/5. PLANNING ACTION AND DOING! I planned two phases:

Phase One-It was to last for a few weeks. The purpose was to get the students acquainted with brainstormings. So I would have one or two every lesson, on different topics, using slightly different procedures. The topic idea would be written up inside a circle and the words they shouted out would be jotted down randomly outside. They were asked to copy the words into their notebooks. Sometimes it would be done orally first, which turned out to be more lively but more demanding on short-term memory; then, it would be jotted down on the board.

The students would then have one or two minutes to study the data and find any organization patterns. Usually, the students were able to add up new ideas while organizing the items under the umbrella words, suggested either by them or, if necessary, by me.

Then short paragraphs would be made orally and/or in written form, either in groups, pairs, or individually. At the beginning, these paragraphs followed a basic format: one introductory sentence with the main idea, several sentences to develop it, and a conclusion. I think collaborative work helped them review cognitive strategies and allay fear.

Phase Two-A few weeks later. When the students were used to the technique, they started using it on their own in pairs or alone.

Meanwhile I had started to modify the initial procedure. For example, sometimes I provided headings like positive/ negative, cause/effect, yes/but, and now/then to facilitate analysis. These relationships proved to be stimulating.

6. ANALYZING DATA. At that time I had read very little about classroom research. The brainstorming project was carried out in a very intuitive way. It was of the diachronic (longitudinal) type, because it lasted for several weeks combined with cross-sectional observations (the tests and compositions).

According to my plan, the main purpose was to intervene in the learning process in such a way that the students would write better texts in the end. Written tests and compositions would also validate the experiment. I would collect the papers and mark them at home. The students' performance was measured against the criteria the syllabus defined. The brainstorming technique would receive a warm round of applause if-and only if-the outcomes were good.

The data showed the students improved their potential. They had a tool that actually helped them elicit information and organize it. It seemed to give them confidence. These students got very good marks in the national examination, but there were other variables that could have explained

their success. I remember some of them saying they could use the brainstorming technique to tackle questions in their geography tests, as well. Actually, after Phase Two the students knew the worth of the technique and preferred it to other devices.

The experiment had elicited student behavior that facilitated understanding of their cognitive strategies and feelings towards writing. The ongoing observation brought about reflection and contributed to the measurable outcomes later. Awareness and understanding can only indirectly be measured. Objective data consolidated their self-esteem and motivation.

7. FURTHER STEPS. Exchanging information with colleagues, listening to their comments, and giving several workshops on paragraph writing, followed by the publication of a short paper on writing skills, completed that reflective cycle.

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